

Layers of meaning in Islamic headwear



The burqa debate challenges us to rethink how people of faith can be loyal citizens.

The issue of the wearing of the burqa — the full body covering, including a veil, worn by some Muslim women — has arisen in various ways in our community in recent months.

While there has been some reasonably low-key debate about the head scarf — known as the hijab — the burqa seems to elicit a more emotive and aggressive response. In broad terms there is a debate about whether it is appropriate for women to wear this piece of clothing in public in a secular society.

For example, Fred Nile recently lost an attempt to ban the burqa in New South Wales. The French government continues its plans for a ban on both the hijab and the burqa, arguing that such a religious symbol should not be worn in public in a secular state.

A judge in Western Australia recently required a woman to remove her burqa when she gave evidence in court because the judge said that people needed to see her face so they could determine the truthfulness of her statement.

Feminists are often opposed to the burqa because they believe it is imposed on women by an oppressive form of male domination.

For some women it is about their ability to be in the public space in a way that is safe; and it is an affirmation of the importance of family and the place women have in the family.

It is a reminder of the multi-faith and multicultural nature of Australia and how we sustain a peaceful and integrated community.

When we speak about the burqa, and when we see women in the burqa in shopping centres or parks or near school gates, many Australians have — rightly or wrongly — a quite visceral, emotional response.

I think the very act of covering up the face in a public space, of refusing to be seen by others, raises for many a fear of both difference and terrorism. It seems to speak of people who don't or will not "fit in" and who wish to be different.

It is a very obvious symbol of Islam that raises questions about the sort of country we are part of and how diverse we wish to be. It raises questions for people of faith about the way others speak of God.

It asks about the limits of personal freedom and the ability to wear what we like.

All these things shape the way we respond and we need to be aware of how our responses shape the way we engage with this important issue.

Freedom and privacy

The issue is a complex one that has to do with the nature of our society and personal and religious freedom.

It is important to recognise that the issues are not just "there" and all we have to do is make a reasoned response. The way we see the burqa and the issues it raises will depend on our prior values, beliefs, experiences and relationships.

There are a number of ways in which this issue can be raised.

1. We could say that this is essentially about personal freedom. For example, Australia's Miss Universe contestant was asked recently whether the burqa should be banned and she said that no government should interfere in what people wanted to wear. For her, and for many others, it is a simple question of personal choice.

2. We could look at this as an issue about the nature of the secular state and the place that religion has in such a state. When we claim to be a secular state, we mean that there is no place for the church or other religious bodies to try to unduly influence the democratic process and that public discourse rests in reason and not revelation. One way this issue could be explored is to ask whether a secular state should have no place for religion or whether it should simply treat all faiths equally. Is there space for engagement around faith issues and can people bring their faith into the public square?

3. We could explore the burqa as a statement about Muslim identity in modern Western society, recognising that, while it is women who wear the clothes, it is men who are generally engaged in the fight about ethnic and religious identity.

4. It could be about gender politics and whether the burqa is imposed on women by a very patriarchal culture and whether this should be allowed in this time.

Alternatively, it could be that women choose to wear the burqa as a way for them to negotiate a safe place in a community where they are a minority and a people with little power and ability to protect themselves.

5. It could be about the way in which our bodies are controlled in the public arena; another way in which the state controls our lives. We live in a consumer-driven society which frequently sexualises women and young girls and leaves them with far too little clothing and yet now — ironically — we are concerned about far too much clothing.

Do we have a right to demand that people dress in a particular way — a way that allows us to know them as we wish — or can people choose how they are known in public?

6. We could place this in a framework about fear, terrorism and security, or in a context of concern for the way we construct a multi-faith and multicultural community. How do we deal with the fear of the unknown, the tendency to stereotype people and think the worst of them, or the way in which fear of terrorism post-9/11 distorts many relationships in our society?

7. Or (and this is an issue that interests me very much) we could explore the way in which Islam rejects the assumptions of modern society that religion is private and has no place in public life and that loyalty to the state is more crucial than loyalty to God.

Since the decision to build an Islamic centre and mosque two blocks from ground zero in New York there has been a new wave of hostility and suspicion aimed at American Muslims. Part of the debate is about whether Muslims put their faith before their country.

This has to be an important issue for Christians for whom God should always be more central than our loyalty to any nation.

8. We could ask how, as Christians, we react to the idea of other faiths. Must we respect and tolerate other faiths or can we simply say that people of other faiths are wrong and need to be converted? And, even if we think people are wrong, what is the best way to relate to people in our society?

Living faithfully

As a Christian, I believe that there are a number of issues that arise from the teachings of the church and the scriptures that provide guidance to the way we might respond to the wearing of the burqa. It is not possible to cover everything but I think there are a few that are crucial:

1. It is an important affirmation of the scriptures that we are not to live in fear but are to trust God and allow God's love to cast out fear. We should not allow fear to dictate our response.

2. We are not to demonise other people but are to love everyone as a neighbour.

3. We are frequently confused about the relationship between being Christians and loyal citizens. Too often we share the values of our community and do not know where to draw the lines that distinguish us as followers of Jesus.

We have been willing to agree to the argument that faith is a private thing, which means it has very little to say to our real, daily life or the wider life of the community. We need to remember how crucial it was to the early followers of Jesus that their central claim was "Jesus is Lord" and that they made that claim over against others who claimed to be Lords.

I think Islam challenges us to rethink how people of faith can be loyal citizens — not whether we are loyal but how we are loyal — and what are the limits of that loyalty for a people who worship God alone.

4. The affirmation of scripture is that Jesus is the clearest revelation of God and the source of our salvation. We have been called to be followers of Jesus and to give witness respectfully.

It is God's concern how God deals with those who have experienced God differently. Our task is to live faithfully and to treat others with love and respect.

5. While we are to be respectful of cultural differences, there are some core values we hold that have to do with inclusiveness and equality. In those situations where women are treated as second-class people, "cultural traditions" is not an adequate defence.

We should speak out against racism, prejudice about other faiths, or stereotypes that rob people of their full humanity.

6. I think the wisdom of the church is that a diverse and inclusive community is not created by banning things that people feel passionate about or stopping the celebrations of particular religious groups because others might take offence. A healthy community allows people to hold strong views, as long as they do so with respect and a willingness to engage with others of different views.

We sometimes act as if new people should have no say in the shape of the community. People who have been here for a while (a small while compared to Indigenous peoples) think they decide what our community should be like and others just fit in.

But we should all have a voice in what our community is like and should negotiate our common life together.

I think there are three reasons why it would be unhelpful to ban the burqa.

First, such a ban can feed a culture that is shaped by concerns for terrorism and which restricts human freedoms out of fear.

Second, banning the burqa reinforces a particular view of what it means to live in a secular society, one that is not helpful for people of faith.

Where do we draw the line? For example, should the government insist that, whatever their theological beliefs, churches must allow divorced people to remarry because that is their right under Australian law? This is not simply a theoretical issue, but one being faced by the Coptic Church in Egypt at this time.

Third, whatever our view of the burqa, do we really wish to use the law to impose a particular cultural-gender identity on people?

As we engage with this issue as Christians I think that it is important to understand how complex it is and not allow ourselves to be drawn to simplistic issues around terrorism or religious difference or gender identity.

There are layers of meaning that have to do with people's social location and interests, and we should tease out those interests and agendas. The best thing we can do is to contribute to a healthy, fear-free, prejudice-free, open conversation that arises from some of the core beliefs and values of the Christian tradition.

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